

In a Small Northern Town

An examination of Civil War period history and events sometimes takes place in an unexpected venue, like a railroad museum in a small northern city bordering the Pocono Mountains. The museum, Steamtown National Historic Site, located in Scranton, PA, recently hosted “Iron Rails in the Civil War” a temporary exhibit. The exhibit brought together four organizations and several individuals — loaning objects and materials and contributing information for the text. In addition to the National Park Service, the groups included the Hammer Galleries of New York City, the Lackawanna Historical Society, and members of the local camp of the Sons of Union Veterans. As the exhibit developed, a surprising amount of Civil War-related material held in the area was loaned for public viewing.

The impetus for developing the exhibit was two oil paintings by the artist Mort Kunstler, who is renowned for his Civil War scenes. Through the Hammer Galleries of New York City, the owner of Kunstler’s Jackson Commandeers the Railroad, Martinsburg, Virginia, June 20, 1861, contacted the park offer-

ing to share his painting with a wider audience. Kunstler himself then offered a copy of his *Iron Horses, Men of Steel*, Winchester, Virginia, June 1861, painting to the park. These two paintings provided the theme for the exhibit: the use and application of railroads during the Civil War. A secondary goal was relating the Civil War and railroads back to the local region of northeast Pennsylvania.

The exhibit occupied an 18-foot by 23-foot room in the park’s Visitor Center. The visual focus upon entering the space was the Martinsburg painting. This and the Winchester painting relate the event of Confederate Colonel Thomas J. Jackson’s raid upon the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad round house and shops in Martinsburg. Jackson brought in expert railroaders and teamsters who moved 14 locomotives, cars, track, and machine tools with 40 horse teams over 38 miles of wagon road to Strasburg, VA, where the equipment was placed on the Manassas Gap Railroad for use inside Confederate territory. Visitors learned that these events were early in the Civil War. Jackson had not yet earned his nom de guerre of “Stonewall,” but his military brilliance was being established through activities such as the B&O raids. Also, two years later, in 1863, the towns of Martinsburg and Harpers Ferry and the western Virginia counties exercised a form of States rights and seceded to form the State of West Virginia.

In retrospect, the exhibit demonstrated the ongoing interest in the Civil War as it brought together recent art works, a 50-year-old locomotive model, a 115-year-old commemorative cane, and remnants of objects from the Civil War period. Kunstler’s paintings were completed in 1999 and 2000. Both required detailed research culminating in physically large paintings presented in a grand historic documentary style. The Lackawanna Historical Society loaned kepis, minie balls, shell fragments, prisoner of war artifacts, and a 4-foot long model of the *Spitfire* locomotive. The *Spitfire* was one of the first locomotives purchased by the local railroad company, the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western, prior to

Model of the Spitfire locomotive, one of the first locomotives purchased by the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company prior to the Civil War.



the Civil War. The model was made in 1951 in commemoration of Lackawanna's centennial. In the Steamtown exhibit, it served as a representative of Civil War era engines.

Color photocopying, image scanning, digital photography, manipulating text with images, and printing out the final product onto glossy photographic paper or selected colored paper has made design and installation of temporary exhibits easier and less expensive than similar endeavors 3 or 4 years ago. The image scanning technology was particularly useful for copying photographs of the local soldiers and sailors from the files of the Sons of Union Veterans. Ripple's lantern slides were also transferred to a digital media. Digitizing lithographs and maps made for easier display in the allotted space.

However, placing the railroads in political context required a traditional written discussion of both Governments' understanding of the transportation system. In truth, the United States overwhelmed the Confederate States. There were no locomotive manufacturing plants in the South, therefore the related skills and industries were missing. Each Southern State exerted independent control over railroads within individual borders, while in the Federal view the railroad companies worked under contract to the U.S. Government. Even though their Government did not grasp the railroads' role, the southern banks knew railroads were important, as illustrated on several specie of currency shown in the exhibit. The notes had a central vignette depicting a train with smoke billowing from the locomotive's stack. After the war, railroads emerged as an economic force. Railroads became America's first big business.

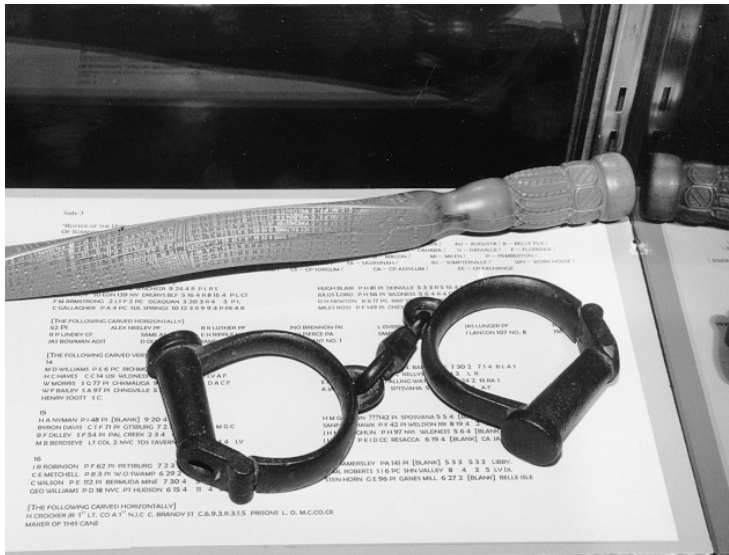
The Civil War is well known for its accumulation of "firsts" — photography, income tax, and the draft are a few examples. As with any new developments or advancements, at the beginning of the war only a few tacticians could forecast the military importance of railroads. By 1860, the railroads were well established in the American landscape; but they were an untried wartime element. Soon both sides transported soldiers and their gear to and from the front lines via railroad, sometimes arriving in the proverbial "nick of time." Boxcars that moved supplies forward to battle in turn carried the wounded away. Railroad track and equipment became military objectives to capture or destroy. The exhibit ex-

plored some applications of the rail transportation system by combining images, text, and artifacts.

Both Union and Confederate artillery crews experimented with mounting artillery weapons on flat cars. The best known gun in this experiment was a very large seacoast mortar nicknamed the "Dictator." Mounted on a small, reinforced flat car, the attacking Union Army hurled 13-inch diameter shells from the mortar into the town of Petersburg, VA, in 1864. On exhibit was a fragment of one of the 200 pound shells hurled from the "Dictator." U-rail, which is rarely seen today, was placed next to period T-rail. Shaped like an upside-down "U," this early iron rail was superseded by "T" shaped track which remains in use today. Copies of photographs and drawings of the "Dictator" and other mounted guns provided the visual explanation.

Artifacts, recruiting posters, and other items loaned from local groups and individuals gave the exhibit its regional flavor and interest. The local camp of the Sons of the Union Veterans of the Civil War has a collection of several hundred photographs of soldiers and sailors taken during the war and often a companion photograph taken later. Visitors were attracted to the 27 chosen faces. Faces, even in the somewhat formal style of the period, gave life to the exhibit. Each photograph was accompanied by a synopsis of the person's regimental history, post-war home address, and post-war employment. These men illustrate an aspect of regional history during or after the war. In 1856, Scranton had 3,000 residents; by 1866 the expansion of the coal mines, iron smelting, and the railroads attracted veterans to the town, thus partially accounting for the leap to 20,000 residents. Many of the soldiers arriving in Scranton were born in Europe or moved from other U.S. cities. Descendants of some of the men remain in the area today. One junior high boy on a class trip saw the photograph of a paternal ancestor and discovered the family had migrated only two blocks during the intervening 140 years.

Additionally, some of the soldiers had bad luck, were captured, and served out the war in a prison camp. About 1890, a Civil War veteran made two similar lathe-turned, 36-inch maple canes. One cane is in private ownership in Connecticut, and the other is in Scranton. Into these canes, he carved the names of 164 Union soldiers then living in Scranton who were taken



Shackles and cane. Cane was carved with the names of soldiers who were prisoners of war and resided in Scranton in the late 1880s.

prisoner of war by the Confederate Army. A magnifying glass is needed to read the name, unit, engagement when captured, date released, and prison. Soldiers captured during the last year of the war were sent to prison camps. The camps were purposefully built along a railroad for ease of delivering the prisoners. The Erie Railroad served a nearby Union prison camp in Elmira, NY, that held 12,000 Confederate prisoners. southern railroads carried Union prisoners to Andersonville, GA, and Florence, SC.

One treasure at the Lackawanna Historical Society is Ezra Ripple's chronicle of his 9 months spent in the Andersonville and Florence prisons. Captured July 3, 1864, in Charleston, SC, Ripple and other prisoners were jammed into unventilated 28-foot-long boxcars for a jolting ride over poorly maintained track in the blasting heat of a Georgia summer. Ripple wrote, "Full of the misery of the present" the prisoners arrived at Andersonville. He remembered that the track was so rough that the prisoners were "thrown on each other like ten pins in a bowling alley." Ripple prepared the memoirs for his family. He commissioned illustrator James E. Taylor of Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper to produce a number of colorized lantern slides to visually emphasize his experiences during speaking engagements. Copies of a couple of the slides were placed in the exhibit to show the horrors of the boxcar ride and the prison camp. Ripple became a mayor of Scranton while Col. Henry M. Hoyt, also captured with the 52nd Pennsylvania Regiment, became a governor of Pennsylvania. The 132nd Pennsylvania Infantry was another regiment with northeastern

Pennsylvania ties. So many Lackawanna Railroad employees volunteered for Company K of the 132nd that it was nicknamed "The Railroad Guard."

In the Scranton area, which probably reflects most places today, Civil War related resource preservation issues have more to do with education in the museum or the classroom than with physical preservation of objects and battlefield sites. Unlike Gettysburg and points south, the Civil War has little presence except for the occasional mention in history class. Through "Iron Rails in the Civil War," visitors to Steamtown were exposed to both railroading and the Civil War as intertwined topics. The Lackawanna Historical Society is open to the public, but the artifacts and archives of the Sons group and the private collectors are not accessible. Visitors saw objects that are rarely on public display. The Historical Society reported several researchers mentioned the exhibit while requesting Civil War or genealogical information. Preservation of Civil War history has come about by pointing exhibit visitors to the channels of research possibilities and by sharing the information and related objects available in a small northern town.

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Photos courtesy Steamtown National Historic Site.